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Dissertation on the present phases of empiricism

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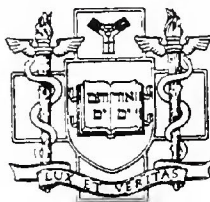
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Dissertations
read by the
Candidates for Degrees and Licenses,
at the
Annual Examination,
in the
Medical Institution of Yale College,
January 17-19.
1844.

16.
XVI.

*Dissertation on the
Present Phases of Empiricism.*

*By Sidney Williams Rockwell.
East Windsor Ct.*

Candidate for a License.

In complying with the laws of this Institution that each candidate for the degree of Doctor of Medicine, for a licence to practise the arts of Medicine and Surgery shall read before the board of Medical Examiners a dissertation on some subject connected with Medical Science; I am well aware that such performances must of necessity bear the marks of juvenility and inexperience.

Modesty indeed would often efface the record which necessity requires, nor is it a subject for wonder that protracted efforts of this nature have so often been likened to the infliction of chronic maladies. Whatever may be the faults of the present it is not designed to increase the catalogues of those.

To present ideas we have recently

received from our learned auditors, is but to introduce old friends in disguise. I have therefore selected a subject not indeed taught in the schools; nevertheless one which is painfully connected with medical science. The present aspect of empiricism therefore constitutes the theme of the ensuing pages.

This scourge of medical science is almost coeval with the science itself. The quack and the dupe have ever existed and their existence and the perpetuity of their false principles and deceptive theories are the result of causes which I shall endeavor to show.

The limits I have proposed forbid a retrospect; I shall therefore only contemplate it as it at present exists. We have indeed too rich a variety to require us to call on past ages for the resuscitation of exploded follies. None of the varied forms however plausible are of long

continuance. "Thomsonianism" with that
tr. cendentalism, ^{of medicine} "homeopathy" are already
receding. that poor blind humanity may
recieve a wave of another exotic humbug
"Hydropathy". The above trio are the three
principal ones but by no means all the
forms of empiricism in present operation.
The whole country is inundated by quacks
operating upon the head, stomach and
bowels by an inscrutable proxy. This
although the offspring of ignorance and
cupidity is too often encouraged and
sanctioned by men who are permitted
to disgrace a noble profession. Nameless
and brainless villains are by such
influence and support often assisted
in plundering community and by
affording false hopes to the afflicted
often take from the faltering hands of
disease and death in hoofs of wretched-
ness the last means of commanding the
necessaries of life. This to the disgrace of

Humanity is often resorted to by those who are aware of its pernicious tendency. It is the continuance of neither of these forms of charlatanism which I have enumerated we have reason to fear. Like all errors they are coarcescent.

"Thomsonianism" is already sinking beneath the superincumbent weight of its own ignorance. Its vulgar votaries can never occupy the hosts of intelligent scientific physicians. Intelligence and modesty begin to shrink from such ungenial contact and it will soon ^{be} enumerated with the errors of past ages.

"Homoeopathy" has passed as a shadow over the continent of Europe seeking rest and finding none but has found a temporary refuge in this country. The subtle essence of its doctrines are not understood but of course embraced for the hour by the lovers of the marvellous. I doubt however whether it could have existed at any other period

of time. In this most wonderful era Transcendentalism has arisen like Venus from the sea foam and is seeking supremacy in literature; mesmerism would usurp the place of physiology not to mention its other absurd phantasies and these vapours of Hahnemann the empire of medical science. Admirable sisterhood! Could there fooleries have been found associated on the pages of past history the whole world would have been convulsed with laughter. Men of science discarding the more rational doctrine of the moon's being made of green cheese are soberly seeking a knowledge of its inhabitants by the aid of mesmerism. Every age has its peculiar phantasies but thanks to the stability of correct scientific principle they are of short duration. People will soon begin to doubt whether all the diseases by which they are afflicted do indeed originate from *Pora*; especially if they have never had the disease or whether the infinitesimal part of a grain of lime will correct a strumous diathesis when they

have taken a scruple daily in their food and drink without effect. They will see that a drop of water will not quench the thirst of a fervid man or a grain of beef allay the demands of an empty stomach. Homeopathy has with respect to itself one true proposition "similia similibus curantur" ergo, folly cures itself. The Homeopathist may now rest from his dreamy labours and hang his mirthless saddlebags upon one of Perkins' metallic tractors which has long since degenerated into a vulgar spike.

It is not therefore the continuance of one or any of the present forms of charlatanism or any that may arise that there is reason to fear each contains the elements of its own dissolution but as like causes produce like effects it is an endless succession of them.

I propose therefore to briefly examine some of the causes which in my view tend to produce and perpetuate them.

The most prominent of these causes exists in the errors of practicing physicians wherever there is a want of harmony or concert of action among the medical faculty there quackery preeminently exists and this for the most obvious reasons. Among physicians there is and probably always will be contrariety of opinion and practice. This may exist both with respect to the fundamental doctrines and their less important details. But the great error consists in the constant appeal to popular opinion and prejudice for decisions in these controversies. In the appeal of parties to this tribunal for the redress of grievances the wary empiric commonly sits as umpire and like the fox in the fable appropriates all the goods that result from them to himself.

I could in no way more clearly illustrate the truth of this than by calling your attention to the introduction and prevalence of "Thompeomanism" in the

northern part of this State. Since the prevalence
of the fatal epidemic of 1811-15 Pneumonia
Typhoides there has existed with respect to
the treatment of fevers generally two distinct
parties. One pursuing the correct doctrines
and treating this class of diseases according to
the clearest indications of a discriminative
pathology; The other unwilling and of
course unable to discover any other form
or variety of the disease or rather the truth
of any other theory have always found de-
bility to be the cause and Opium brandy
and bark the sure antidote to all fevers.
In this State of the Controversy a direct
appeal to the public was made and these
conflicting opinions were carried to the
Chambers of disease and death each prom-
ising to his patient dissolution in case of
rejection of his own favorite prescription
To the friends therefore was left the direction
as to the proper course to pursue and since
by the united testimony of the Physicians

there there was no hope in either case both were wisely rejected. Mankind were thus taught one important lesson viz. that men in certain pathological states are very tenacious of life and from this cause chiefly this bundle of the absurdities of the above named ignoramus found refuge among the people of Connecticut.

Many of the practices of physicians at present existing in no small measure tend to perpetuate this evil. One of which and among regularly educated physicians in this country a somewhat novel one. I allude to those unwilling to trust their professional reputation to the modest manifestations of their own works adopt the empirical practice of proclaiming them to the public through the medium of a popular press. These have ever been the vehicles of empirics. They appeal to a tribunal of course incapable of correct judgement and perpetuates practices pernicious to the welfare of medical science. Countenance this principle of action

and it would in time reduce an honorable profession to a vulgar traffic and elevate boasting mediocrity to the place of unassuming worth. I might multiply examples of this nature but their existence and tendency are too well known and too severely felt to require further comment.

Where no countenance given to empirics either regular or irregular by the friends of science and order—The quack would search in vain for his dupe and the doctor with success for his fee.

New Haven January 15th 1844.

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